

***Statement of Senator John Breaux
Ranking Member of the Special Committee on Aging
September 23, 1999***

I would like to thank Senator Grassley for convening this forum. He has been a tireless leader in the fight against nursing home neglect and abuse. Since we began this project more than a year ago, I have learned that there are no quick fixes to nursing home quality of care problems. The Nursing Home Initiative has been an enormous undertaking by HCFA, the states and this Committee. I applaud HCFA and the state survey agencies for their concerted effort to improve nursing home oversight. Today, we will hear from the consumers and the advocate community just how far we have come since this undertaking began.

The "Initiative" is made up of 30 individual measures such as staggering survey schedules, and posting survey results on the Internet. Some of these have been fully executed, others are still being put into effect. In Louisiana, the staggered surveys have been extremely effective in ceasing the predictability of inspections. I would like to congratulate HCFA and the state surveyors on that success. And I would also like to encourage HCFA and the state survey agencies to work with the state Long Term Care Ombudsmen to effectively improve nursing home care. Ombudsmen are in the nursing homes frequently and act as a voice for residents, whereas surveyors are only there once a year. Ombudsmen are a critical resource and should be brought to the table for discussions on complaints and enforcement.

Not only must we ensure that HCFA and the states carry out these initiatives to improve care, we must give consumers quality, usable information to empower them to make good decisions when choosing a nursing home. Clearly, a reactive approach to problems is not the most effective. Consumer information is the first step in being proactive.

Finally, it is crucial to address these concerns before the number of retirees explodes to 77 million in the approaching years. As the baby boomers begin to age, many new industries will pop up to serve them and make a profit. We must apply the lessons we have learned from the nursing home industry so that we don't experience these problems on a much larger scale.